Property Dualism

The theory

Property Dualism is the view that there is only one substance in our heads, but that it has two totally different sets of properties, which cannot be reduced to or translated into one another. The theory aims to find an ontology of mind somewhere between substance dualism and reductive physicalism.

History

The beginnings of the theory seem to be in Spinoza’s Dual Aspect Monism: “mind and body are one and the same individual, conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (Ethics, II.21 – ‘extension’ is Descartes’s word meaning ‘occupying physical space’ – hence, ‘an object’).

The modern originator of the view is Donald Davidson, in his essay ‘Mental Events’ (1970).

Davidson’s Arguments

• The first step is to claim that behaviourism is wrong because there is no particular behaviour that is appropriate for any given mental event. There cannot be the strict link between mind and world which is needed for reductive physicalism (compare the links between chemistry and physics).
• The multiple realisability of mental events also means they are not tied to any particular type of physical event.
• Mental events follow their own internal laws – of maths, reason, logic, purposes – which are quite different from the laws of physics.
• So mental events are independent of brain events, and “there are not psycho-physical laws”.
• But dualism is wrong, because of the interaction problem; if the mind is quite different from the natural world, then it couldn’t cause physical events.
• So mental events must also be part of the physical world, because that is the only way they can have their obvious physical effects, in human behaviour.
• All we can say is that mental events are an “anomaly” within a physical world. Davidson christened his new theory Anomalous Monism (one stuff, but with a misfit property of consciousness).
• The relationship between the mind and brain is not separate (dualism) or identity (physical), so he suggested calling the relationship “supervenience”. This means they are different but inseparable.
• The theory has been called token-token identity, because it says there is always some physical brain event (though of no particular type) to accompany any mental event.
• More recently the theory has been known as Non-Reductive Physicalism, and also Property Dualism (meaning that the properties are profoundly different, even though the substance isn’t).

Advantages

• It keeps the physicalist idea that there is only one substance, and humans are not ‘supernatural’
• It avoids the unattractive side of physicalism – that vital aspects of our lives such as free will, reason, moral values, understanding, and enduring identity are just actions of physical ‘meat’

Criticisms

• The concept of supervenience always turns out to be too strong or too weak for the theory
• There is a danger of making the mind into an irrelevant ‘epiphenomenon’
• The theory sees the mind-body relationship as being almost as miraculous as dualism did
• The theory offers no real explanations, no research programme, and no prospect of predictions
• Some properties of things are connected (hardness and rigidity), while others are separate (hardness and shape), but that doesn’t mean that separate properties are ‘irreducible’
• There are no analogies to illustrate property dualism, showing that it is a unique phenomenon in nature, which should make us suspicious; is it vanity to think we are uniquely special?
• Given that virtually everything in nature seems to be reducible (see especially the history of the idea of ‘life’), it seems highly likely that mind will also be reducible.